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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A PUBLIC UTILITY NEED

SIR:

In the February number of the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW there appeared a most notable and fair article on the public utility problem, by Mr. Wm. McClellan. In this article Mr. McClellan treats almost entirely of the steam railroad situation and passes by entirely the psychological phase of the situation. Nor does he go into the case with those other necessary and much hampered public utilities, the electric railway—street and interurban—electric light and power, gas and telephone. These utilities are facing troubles, are living in them, quite as serious as those being faced by the railways. And as they are quite as necessary to public service and economic development, to industrial efficiency and the living of the people, they deserve consideration. They, as local factors, have the same influence on industrial and civic development, as the railways have in a larger, more national sense.

What Mr. McClellan says regarding the desirability of regulation applies with equal truth to the local utilities as it does to the railways. They desire wise and just regulation. They vastly prefer State regulation as it is now conducted, to unrestricted and wasteful competition or to local regulation by many small political units, such as counties, towns and municipalities.

The psychology of the regulation of utilities is a deep subject, bounded on all sides by the vagaries of the human mind. Just why the utilities of the country should be judged by people and lawmakers by standards of business and personal ethics and practise other and far different from those given other classes of business, is a psychological question, one that it is useless to go into. It is deep water with much floundering and little progress. Just why public opinion should regard the public utility business in so different a light from other business is just as mysterious—only partially answered by the psychologist—as why it expects inexperienced and less able men to handle public affairs, excuses them in their failures and accepts a different standard of honesty and efficiency from them.

One of the reasons why our utilities are so misjudged, however, is because they continually handle large figures, for, to the average mind a million is an immense sum, an immensely indefinite sum, with which one may do anything—the average mind and even the-above-the-average mind cannot appreciate or comprehend it. The situation in this regard is somewhat improved, since, as a nation, we have been throwing around in reckless abandon such terms as millions and billions.

As to regulation, its chief evil today is that it is, and in the nature of things governmental, must be, political. Regulatory laws are made by legislators responsible to the voters—and they naturally seek to please their employers—the majority. Regulating Commissions are named by political officers from among their political friends, to a large extent, and quite frequently have their political ears to the ground, and must to a degree, depending on their personal strength and character, heed what they hear. At that many of them are earnest and try to do what is right.

Then, too, there enters the fact that too many such commissioners are paid salaries of from \$3,000 to \$15,000 a year, and so are generally selected from men who are making less than that sum, for few men will give up a lucrative income to accept a short term position at a less income than they are making. Yet these commissioners and their staffs must meet and deal with men who are receiving—and earning—incomes several times what the Commissioners receive; and whose staffs of lawyers, engineers and accountants are also better paid—therefore generally of higher ability—than the staffs of the Commissioners. In fact, most of the Commissioners, and most of their staff members, who display high abilities are bid into utility or industrial life.

Yet regulation is vastly preferable to political domination by elected town boards or city councils.

While this is all true, and while conditions due to war are seriously affecting the utilities, those great and laudable enterprises are not entirely free from some responsibility for their conditions, both economic and of public relations. Few utilities have recognized the necessity for wise merchandising in their relations with the public. First in the order of influences in the development of their great business has been the financial buccaneer. His influence is not yet over but his power has diminished. His practices are responsible for much of the disrepute in which such industries still are held by the unthinking public—still the ground for much of the political muck raking and prejudice arousing.

Today, to a great extent, the utilities are in the hands of the engineers—clean, high thinking, hard working men of technical ability and vision—acquainted with slide rule and statistical table, with the mechanics and the mathematics of the business; able constructors and operators. These able men have in many cases built up splendid plants, effected most excellent economies in production and efficiency in operation. But, alas, too frequently they are not merchants.

These men make a product—service—which they have for sale. The success of their business depends in large degree on the selling of that service. Into the selling enter all matters of public relations, including the formation of public opinion that is reflected in the laws and regulations, the creation of a desire for the service, the details of its rendering—from the consumers', not the engineers' viewpoint—and the treatment of the public—the actual and potential customers. This all calls for successful merchandising.

Many of the utilities have sales organizations, true. But far too frequently they are technical organizations rather than merchandizing forces. In the street railway organization even the sales force is almost entirely lacking.

In this sense the merchant should not be a mere salesman, as the term usually is applied. He should be a diplomat, a skilled creator of demand and of customers for his product. While the engineer is producing the service and keeping it up to a high efficiency, the merchant is disposing of it. When business is brisk and profitable he is seeing that service is given and appreciated. When times are slack and the margin of profit is low, he seeks selling methods of strengthening business and tiding over the slack period—just as does the successful merchant in other lines.

Rarely is there combined in the one man the technical ability of the engineer competent to produce the service, and the equally commercial ability of the merchant competent to successfully dispose of the stock of "service" in good times and bad.

Eight years of service with public utilities, and a dozen other years of intimate acquaintance with them, while not directly connected with them, has taught me that a crying necessity of utilities is merchandising, that a considerable part of their difficulties would be greatly smoothed by wise merchandising. The same is as true of steam rail-roading as of the more local public utilities.

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ANTIPHHRASIS

SIR:

French Academicians, we are told, in preparing a new edition of their Dictionary, are greatly puzzled over American slang, many words of which they are at a loss to define. From the examples which have been cited, however, one surmises that it is not so much slang that gives them trouble as the perverse and detestable antiphrasis which has in recent years become one of the most annoying, misleading, and altogether pernicious corruptions of current speech. Genuine slang is seldom difficult to interpret. The context makes it clear. Sometimes it is superfluous, sometimes it is vulgar, sometimes it is indefensible. But sometimes, too, it is happily conceived and is an enrichment of the vocabulary, destined on the morrow to become classic speech. An example in point is the word "slang" itself, which is of the origin which itself describes. New words are necessary, from time to time. Some may be formed academically, through grammatical derivation. Others have to be new creations. Doubtless the former class should be—though generally they are not—accordant with etymological principles. The latter must generally be laws unto themselves.

The current and increasingly prevalent antiphrasis is very different. It must be far more puzzling to the foreigner than any slang, and far more